

HOW REAL IS ARAB NATIONALISM?

Nasserism Paves the Way for Communism

WALTER Z. LAQUEUR

ARAB nationalism existed before the Russian Revolution, and it would have continued to grow without it. But without Soviet encouragement and guidance it would not have attained its present dimensions—and without a sharp change in the Soviet attitude toward non-Communist and even reactionary regimes in backward countries, this encouragement and guidance itself would not have been forthcoming.

Under Stalin, Communist collaboration with non-Communist movements in Asia or Africa was out of the question. At least it became so after 1928, when the Communist alliance with the Chinese nationalists collapsed. From then on Stalin was suspicious even of Asian Communists; his coolness toward the Chinese party until shortly before the latter's triumph shows that. All the more reason why he, the "Marxist-Leninist," should refuse to cooperate with national, or social, "reformists" like Nehru and the other representatives of the Asian "colonial bourgeoisie," whom he saw as mainly engaged in hoodwinking the "masses" in the interest of Western imperialism. A narrow, hyper-dogmatic interpretation of Marxism-Leninism plus Stalin's own tendency to distrustfulness and caution—especially in foreign affairs—imposed a Communist policy in Asia that in retrospect can be seen as self-defeating in its

rigidity. Although under Stalin's own regime power rested neither with the proletariat nor the party, he continued to view the dictatorship of the proletariat as indispensable to revolution elsewhere—or, failing that, it was indispensable to a party-led "revolution from above" installed by Soviet Russian bayonets. Since the right kind of proletariat was lacking in Asia, and since there seemed no chance there for a "revolution from above," Stalin in effect wrote that vast continent off as a theater of Communist expansion.

After Stalin's death a general revision of the old tenets of Leninism was undertaken in Moscow. Its first product was, in Europe, the "coexistence" campaign of 1955; in Asia it was the effort at a broad rapprochement with non-Communist governments and national movements in general. This meant, in the Middle East, the support of Arab "national socialism" against the West. It also meant support for some of the most reactionary regimes on earth. Nonetheless, the ideological justification for this turn was not hard to provide. A venture in a similar direction had already been made back in the early 20's, when Lenin and Stalin explained that the Emir of Afghanistan was a progressive force because he opposed Western imperialism, whereas the British Labor party was not.

In an article in a recent number of the official Russian party magazine, *Kommunist*, the rationalization is given complete. Soviet policy in the past had been "nihilistic" in rejecting the help of the Asian "nationalist bourgeoisie," the clergy, and even some of the great landowners in the struggle against colonialism. There was no real danger that these elements would become the leading force in this struggle: the mere ex-

ARAB nationalism is a loudly trumpeted phrase today—what does it mean, how real is it? WALTER Z. LAQUEUR, who here examines that movement's character and content, is an authority on Middle Eastern affairs and the author of *Communism and Nationalism in the Middle East*, published by Praeger last year. His most recent contribution to COMMENTARY was "Soviet Policy and Jewish Fate" (October 1956).

istence of the USSR and the other Communist states was a guarantee against that eventuality. Nor should the Communist attitude be as negative as in the past toward the "utopianist and populist socialism" rife in the Orient. Admittedly, a good deal of it was just "fashionable talk" and even represented a conscious attempt to betray the masses, but it was nonetheless incumbent on Communists to encourage the anti-capitalist mood now "widespread both among the people and the intelligentsia." The writer goes on to say: "In the East we have a repetition—though in very different political circumstances—of various early phases of the revolutionary struggle . . . it would be wrong to assume that the Pestels, Ryleyevs, Herzens, Tolstoy, and Chernishevskys could emerge *only* in the Russia of the past century—that they cannot appear again in the contemporary East."

ALL this is new in Soviet Moscow. Westerners had long ago noticed the populist and vaguely anti-capitalist character of much of Asian nationalism and were therefore less surprised by its postwar development. But the emphasis on populism and anti-capitalism can go too far: to mention Nasser of Egypt and Ali Abu Nawar of Jordan in the same breath as Herzen and Tolstoy is ludicrous. The populist intelligentsia of 19th-century Russia were radically democratic, and they were also humanistic and cosmopolitan; nothing could be less true of the leaders, political or intellectual, of Arab nationalism.

What the author of the article in *Kommunist* really means is that any government or movement, no matter how reactionary and backward, is acceptable to the Soviet Union as an ally as long as it does not side with the West. The decisive criterion for Soviet Communism today is the international balance of power, not social or political institutions. And Leninism is now interpreted according to long-term considerations, not immediate issues, on the assumption—which is not unfounded in view of the inability of most of the present regimes in the Middle East to

solve their internal problems—that time works altogether in favor of Communism, and that the Nassers and their like will eventually be replaced by Communist fronts.

For these and a variety of other reasons, the Soviets see the Middle East as the most—and perhaps the only—promising sphere for the expansion of their power at the present moment. Moscow may still try for "coexistence" in Europe because it has no chance of winning further ground there without precipitating a world war, but the situation in the Middle East is radically different. Syria, Jordan, and perhaps Egypt have a good chance of being transformed into "popular democracies" without exposing the Soviets to the risk of all-out war. After all, the Eisenhower Doctrine is designed to deal with military aggression alone, not with ostensibly peaceful transfers of power or *coups d'état*. For the same reason it would not serve Russian purposes to extend the "coexistence" campaign to the Middle East or make a deal there with the West.

Whether the West could have reached a temporary understanding with Stalin over the Middle East in 1948 or 1951 is a moot point. With his heirs, who move with a great deal less caution in foreign affairs than he, such an understanding is out of the question. In 1946 Stalin withdrew from Persia under Western pressure; nor did he dare to try to carry out any of the dire threats he uttered against Turkey. His heirs, however, have declared themselves ready to contemplate the use of military force to "protect" the emerging "popular democracies" of the Arab world. Whether or not this is a bluff, the effect of their new attitude has been to make the Middle East the most explosive area of world politics; and it is no exaggeration to say that the danger of war—and not only of a local one—is now greater than it ever was under Stalin.

II

THE compliant way in which Arab nationalism has yielded to Communist infiltration, influence, and guidance not only reveals aspects of that nationalism which

Western foreign offices have paid too little attention to, but discloses a wealth of tactical potentialities and resources possessed by world Communism which the West in general had hardly suspected. Every weakness in Arab nationalism seems to elicit and link up with a complementary strength in Communism.

It is essential to Communism in the Middle East that Arab nationalism should remain impotent to solve the social, economic, and real political problems of the Middle East. Nasser's helplessness before his real problems is what keeps him committed to anti-Westernism, and leads him to dream aloud of an Arab empire instead of working simply for a strong Egyptian state. It is also what makes his collaboration with the Russians so necessary.

Underneath the impotence of Arab nationalism lies an absence of content, of ideas, even of ideology. Nasserism—Arab "national socialism"—is not a doctrine or a political philosophy; it is simply a state of mind. Nasser himself and his colleagues have never tried to lay down a detailed political program, let alone formulate political ideas. They know what they are against—foreign rule and influence, and what they think is monopoly capitalism—and that, they believe, is enough for the time being. For the rest, they say they are for restoring to Egypt and to the Arab world their old power and glory. Nazism and Fascism may have been woefully shoddy ideologies, but by comparison with present-day Arab nationalism they look like profound and sophisticated philosophies—at least they tried to endow "being German" or "being Italian" with some meaning.*

But dreams of grandeur and wishful thinking are not enough if the Arabs themselves are to fill the "power vacuum" in the

Middle East, as they say they intend to. What is required is the radical secularization and modernization of their society, which requires in turn the willingness and the ability to cope with social and economic problems. This would mean much less bombastic speechifying and much, much more hard work. Yet nothing is further from the state of mind which is Arab nationalism than economic and social questions. This is why the economic projects for the Middle East now being urged in the West, though well meant, are beside the point and will not bring a political solution in that area any nearer. (Which does not mean that they should be dropped; only no illusions should be entertained about their short-term political effect.)

Far more important than social or economic questions is the political factor, or rather the emotional and psychological factor that expresses itself through politics. This is what Western statesmen and observers seem to have the greatest trouble understanding.

THE West itself has only just begun to outgrow the phase of nationalism in which national self-esteem and prestige were all-decisive, and countries went to war to protect their honor or for the sake of a few square miles of territory. Many Asian countries, however, are just entering that phase. Nehru may be a paragon of political wisdom and good sense compared to Nasser, and yet, with some 350 million Indians to feed and clothe on his hands, he has ventured to the brink of war for the sake of another ten million in Kashmir who can only add to the difficulties of the government he heads.

"National honor" likewise accounts for most of the intensity of Arab feeling about Israel. The bitterness of that feeling has frequently been exaggerated in the West, but is tremendous nevertheless—and derives almost entirely from wounded self-esteem, not from resentment at the plight of the Arab refugees or at the inconvenience caused by broken land communications between Cairo and Amman or Damascus. The Sinai campaign, despite the completely falsified

*This is not to say that some Arab thinkers, in the 19th and the present century, have not tried to inject a content into Arab nationalism and define its relevance to the present (see H. Z. Nuseibeh's *Ideas of Arab Nationalism*, published by the Cornell University Press in 1956). But though their attempts have been serious and laudable, the results have not been satisfactory. Nasser himself has learned far more from Mussolini than from any Arab ideologue.

accounts of it circulated to the Arab public, has only exacerbated the wound. And on top of all this is the xenophobia endemic to the Arab world, which would be there even without Israel and without colonialism.

There is a school of thought which holds that Western relations with the Arab world were amicable and easy up until the First World War, when Britain and France moved into the Middle East, a Jewish national home was founded in Palestine, and Western penetration was increased in other ways; if only all this could be undone, it is said, things would return to normal in the Middle East. Nothing could be more illusory. Time was when Islam was indeed more tolerant and progressive than the West, but that was five hundred years ago, and since the Middle Ages virulent xenophobia, fanatical intolerance, and anti-Westernism have been the rule throughout the Moslem world, and especially in its Arab part. The notion that Arab hostility to the West arose only in 1914, or in the late 19th century, is contradicted by all travelers' accounts from the 18th century on.

If anything, Israel acts as a lightning conductor for Arab anti-Westernism, and were she to disappear the West would become more of a direct target of Arab resentment than before. As Hans E. Tütsch, who covers the Middle East for the Swiss *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* (and who is almost unique among foreign correspondents in that area in knowing Arabic), writes in a recent book (*Die arabischen Völker am Kreuzweg*, Zurich, 1956): "It would be a mistake to assume that with a solution of the Palestine conflict a pacification of the Middle East would follow. The problems facing the great powers cannot be solved in Palestine alone. There are deeper causes than the Arab-Israel conflict for the unrest in the Middle East." Among these deeper causes, the crisis of Arab self-esteem in general bulks very large—and it happens to be something that Communism finds easy to exploit.

In the Middle East even more than in China or Southeastern Asia, Communism has demonstrated a new capacity to cham-

pion the claims to self-esteem of nationalities, and not only of social classes. Nor is this all. The tactical and psychological flexibility of post-Stalin Communism—which makes it much more formidable than Nazism or Fascism ever were on the international scene—is further shown by the fact that it can act as a vehicle of the most backward kind of xenophobia. And Communism's formal adherence to internationalism only serves to make it the more effective in this role (just as the Soviets' official opposition to anti-Semitism enables them to practice anti-Semitism with more impunity, and with the collaboration of Jews themselves).

BUT Communist opportunism has for a long time been infinite, at least in possibility. More than thirty years ago the Soviets already had on hand an ideological device with which to fan Arab anti-Westernism in the colonial countries as well as inflate their self-esteem. A Moslem Tartar named Sultan Galiev, who served in the 20's as one of Stalin's men in the Commissariat for Nationalities in Moscow, developed the idea that the real solution of the world's problems lay in a dictatorship of the backward over the industrialized countries. Against the worldwide dictatorship of one class (the proletariat) or the present dictatorship of the world by the West, Galiev wrote, "We advance another theory: the material premises for a social transformation of humanity can be created only through the establishment of the dictatorship of the colonies and semi-colonies over the metropolises."

Galiev's "theory" was mentioned in several books published in Russia in the 20's, and very recently in a book by Richard Pipes, *The Formation of the Soviet Union* (Harvard University Press, 1954), but otherwise it had been virtually forgotten, Galiev himself having disappeared during a purge some time in the late 20's. But now his idea has cropped up again in the Middle East. Surprisingly, many echoes of it have been heard in the Cairo and Damascus "national socialist" press over the last year

—and the main accent has been on its anti-Western implications.

The socialist component in Arab "national socialism" is in any case extremely nebulous. The Arab "national socialists" are for the Communist-dominated World Federation of Trade Unions, but against the class struggle. They favor the Communists against the Social Democrats. The only place where Arab "national socialism" becomes less vague is in its attitude toward the advanced countries of the West. Here there is no room for nonsense about internationalism, proletarian or otherwise: all that matters is the defeat and humiliation of the West, and its reduction to a dependency of the great Arab empire of the future.

This may sound like sheer megalomaniacal fantasy without any connection with reality, but the emotion behind it is of decisive importance in the Arab world of today, and one to which the West would do well to pay regard. It explains why it would probably be easier right now for the West to reach an understanding with Russia or her satellites than with the "national socialist" Arabs themselves.

III

IN TAKING cognizance of the Communist threat in the Middle East it would be misleading to look for parallels with the course of events in Eastern Europe after 1945. There the Communists came to power through popular fronts or alliances with left Socialist or liberal politicians, whom they were able subsequently to "cut away" with the help of the very Russian bayonets that had installed the Communists in the post-war governments in Eastern Europe in the first place. In the Middle East there is no Red Army, and the Communists collaborate with right extremists rather than with left or liberal politicians, who are anyhow few and far between. Moreover, the countries of the Middle East are far more backward than those of Eastern Europe. Thus the conditions for Communist penetration in the Middle East are quite different, and require of the Communists themselves a

much more complicated plan of campaign.

The kind of "popular democracy" which will emerge in the Arab world if the Communists get their way may constitute a new departure and set a new pattern. The textbooks of Leninism—especially since the 20th Congress of the Russian party—contain nothing that would prohibit a specifically Middle Eastern variety of "popular democracy."

One of its features would certainly be the continuation of the stress the Communists everywhere now put on international politics. This would mean redoubling the fight against the West while abstaining carefully from any demand for, or attempt to carry out, major social or economic reforms at home that might antagonize the allies of the regime among the "national bourgeoisie," the landlords, or the clergy. Yet the Communists would at the same time bend every effort to entrench themselves in key positions of power in the police, the army, the press, and the radio, and would try to squeeze out all potential rivals. Given their superior organization, their political training, and the absence in the Middle East of organized political parties on the Western model, they should not have too much trouble in doing this. By then the purpose of the "national front" would have been fulfilled, and its Communist wire-pullers would be able to proceed safely to put the heat on the "national bourgeoisie" and other allies no longer needed.

Actually, this is the stage that has already been reached in Syria, and which is approaching in Jordan.

In Syria the government and administration are undergoing a drastic purge designed to eliminate all officials suspected of being pro-Western or pro-democratic, and even some who are guilty of nothing more than having had a Western education. The two main political parties, the Sha'ab and the National, are being subjected to increasing intimidation, and those of their leaders who are anti-Communist have been or are about to be arrested, and some of them are already being tried. The old executive committees

of these parties are in process of dissolution, and their new committees, elected under Communist pressure, are filled largely with fellow-travelers and other people willing to cooperate with the Communists. At this point, and this point only, the picture begins to resemble that in Eastern Europe at the time when the Communists were getting rid of rival political parties.

Now that the Communists are showing their hand so openly in the Middle East, Western observers are at a loss to understand the failure to react of Arab non-Communist politicians. With all that the past has taught the world about Communist ways and means, how can bona fide nationalist leaders like Shukri el-Kuwatli and Zabri el-Assali in Syria, and Suleiman Nabulsi in Jordan, go on collaborating as closely as they still do with the Communists? How can the Socialist Ba'th party in Syria actually enter into negotiations for a merger with them? Either these people have become Communists themselves, or else they are possessed by a suicidal impulse; there seems to be no possible third explanation.

But for that matter, how can it be explained that practically all Arab heads of government, from Saud in Arabia to Nasser in Egypt and President Kuwatli in Syria, continue to protest that Communism is no threat in the Middle East?

The over-all explanation—and this is something Western observers again find it hard to realize—must be sought really in the political blindness, stupidity, and crassness of the non-Communist leaders of the Arab world. There are some exceptions, but on the whole the Arab Communists are so superior to their rivals in political competence as to make the issue seem sealed in advance and Communist domination of the Middle East only a matter of time. And yet the matter is not quite as simple as that, even when we take Arab political obtuseness into full account.

When Khaled Bakdash, leader of the Syrian Communists and the chief among Middle Eastern Communists in general,

declares, as he did the other day, that there is no Communist danger in Syria, it is a huge joke, for in his eyes Communism is not a danger but something very much to be wished for. But when Kuwatli, Nasser, or Saud say the same thing, not only is a general ignorance of Russia, Communism, and world affairs involved, but also an element of political expediency (as well as a large dosage of wishful thinking).

If Nasser and the other Arab heads of government renounced anti-Westernism they would have to replace it with programs of radical domestic reform. But there is nothing they have less appetite for than that. Their dilemma is well described by a distinguished Arabist, Sir Hamilton A. R. Gibb (*Atlantic Monthly*, October 1956):

Inevitably, as the nationalist leaders felt mass support slipping away they made ever more violent efforts to regain it by continuing to harp on the continued presence of European forces or enterprises or controls, or on the hidden hand of Western diplomacy and on Western support of Zionism. When accused of neglecting social issues, they insisted that those were secondary and controversial, and must not disrupt the nation's united determination to achieve its national aims. However genuinely the politicians desired national independence, they did not know what to do with it. Concentrating on its negative aspect as freedom from interference and without positive program, they could only try to fill the void of policy by propaganda.

This defines the position not only of old-style Arab politicians like Kuwatli, but also of new-style Arab dictators like Nasser. For them a pro-Soviet orientation has become the path of least resistance. And against the dangers to be met along that path they conjure up the magic powers of "Arab integral nationalism," which they profess to believe—perhaps even sincerely, such is the wishfulness produced by their dilemma—is so much the strongest force in the Middle East as to render that region immune to the more serious consequences of close cooperation with Communism and the Soviet Union.

Meanwhile the Communists continue to

make hay. Syria is already ruled by a pro-Soviet junta of army officers with Communist political advisers, and enjoys the benefit not only of full-scale political purges and show trials, but a muzzled press most of whose foreign news is supplied by Tass bulletins, and of a radio that broadcasts Soviet propaganda in Russian as well as Arabic. Those non-Communists, including President Kuwatli and his prime minister who have been left in office, are figureheads without real power. The Communists are now sponsoring a "national charter" to which eighty deputies to the Syrian parliament, its majority, have already subscribed, and a new Communist-controlled "state" party is on the way to full rule in the country.

IN JORDAN the Communists are represented in the government, but still face some real opposition, particularly from King Hussein. His desperate attempts to stem the tide of Communist infiltration have so far resulted, however, in nothing more than half-hearted administrative measures. One gets some idea of Hussein's caliber as a Red-baiter from his effort to "smear" Communism as a "Zionist invention." This kind of propaganda is even more ineffective—aside from being ludicrous—than Nuri Said's attempt in Iraq to fight Communism as atheistic. (As it happens, urban Arabs, and especially the intelligentsia among them, care far less about their religion than most Westerners realize. Nor do the Communists themselves sponsor militantly atheist propaganda any more; now they call attention to the churches and mosques still functioning in the USSR, and they have even succeeded in getting a number of Moslem clergymen in Arab countries to vouch for their honorable intentions toward religion.)

Fundamentally, the situation in Jordan is the same as in Syria, and unless she manages to break away from the Cairo-Damascus axis—which seems very unlikely—and even more important, develops an independent non-Communist policy at home, she is destined to go the same way as Syria.

In Egypt the Communist movement has been united only since last September and is still illegal—but so now are all other political parties in the country. Not a single member of the ruling junta belongs to the Communist party, yet the whole Egyptian press, the radio, and all the other media of public communication have fallen into the hands of fellow-travelers. These have also gained many commanding positions in the political police, the army, and the civil administration.

Fellow-travelers by no means form a majority in Egyptian public life, but they do constitute the only group that knows what it wants, and as a result they have had a decisive hand in creating the present political climate of the country and in shaping the style of the regime and its outlook on world affairs. They have also imported "socialist realism" into Egypt, and there is now more "socialist realist" art and literature there, according to a recent visitor, "than in the whole of East Europe."

A book published in Paris last year, *L'Egypte en mouvement* (Editions du Seuil) by Jean and Simone Lacouture, gives a picture of how the Communists and fellow-travelers got where they now are in Egypt. That its authors lived in Egypt, are favorably disposed toward Nasser, and had a good deal to do with the Egyptian "progressistes" adds perhaps to the reliability of their account.

They tell how, in 1952, the Egyptian Communists decided to "cultivate" the ruling military junta. "The junta is a coming force," they said. "But it has no sense of direction. There is a vacuum, we will fill it; it has no ideology, no cadres, no political knowhow. We will give it its orientation." As the authors show convincingly, the Egyptian Communists have ever since provided Nasser's junta with its slogans and guided its actions: "The Communists and 'progressives' thus took the place of the American advisers, who had between 1952 and 1954 wanted to channel the regime toward a prudent reformism. . . ."

But all that the Egyptian Communists and "progressives" really have in common

with Nasser and his colleagues is anti-Westernism. Once the present phase is passed and the Communists and their sympathizers have entrenched themselves securely, there is bound to be a parting of the ways.

At this point those who would accuse me of exaggerating the Communist danger in the Middle East might say: Granted that Nasserism lacks positive content, but may you not be applying the terms "Communism" and "Communist" to the Middle Eastern scene too loosely, too sweepingly, and too often? After all, isn't the number of card-carrying Communists in the Middle East still rather small, and are there not perhaps ten to twenty times as many fellow-travelers—especially among the intelligentsia—and isn't there quite a difference between them and party members?

Granted, but the ultimate political effect still tends to be the same. For the fellow-travelers and the "progressives" follow wher-

ever the card-carriers lead, and the "integral nationalists" follow the fellow-travelers.

The truly historic misfortune of the Arab world at the present juncture is perhaps the absence of a genuinely left political force. There are several Trotskyite splinter groups in the Middle East and a small Socialist movement in Lebanon, but nothing else. Only a strong and independent left could offer Middle Eastern Communism a real challenge, or else regimes modeled on Mustafa Kemal's precedent. But whereas Nasser could still have opted for Kemalism in 1955, now it is too late—he cannot turn back.

Nasser's "national socialism," and Arab nationalism in general—being the inflated mixture of "dynamism" without direction and propaganda without content that they are—seem made to order for the Communists; they provide them with just the sort of opposition and rivalry they can batten on. In effect, they prepare the way for them.

TOURO SYNAGOGUE

RUTH WHITMAN

As to an unknown lover I returned
To my father's land, a shifting land,
now jeweled
And satined like a bride, a holy ark.

A stranger to his house, I heard my talk
More friendly to the twelve Ionic trees
Than to the tribes of Israel, more shy

To celebrate this birthday than to die.
White and perfect, starred with candlelight,
The sacred chamber held a secret stair.

The heart's escape leads out to everywhere,
Nowhere, but dreams still find a certain
black
Connecticut hill.

My grandfather stands tall
And wraps me in his cemetery cloak,

Encircles me against the nightmare
chill,
Till gowned in fear I follow with his ghost
Through village, town, down through the
midnight past
To a second son reading by candlelight
Forbidden books that set his passion free,

To an immigrant tender in his blasphemy,
Bold, repentant, joyful against death,
Rich in gesture, eloquent as earth.

Ignorant of all, I catch my breath
To hear the sharp crack of the shattered
cup.
Driven to live, I grope to gather up
The windless torch of love, my tribe's
rebirth.

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